8 Tips for Avoiding Email Overload

by CHARLIE KAPLAN

Email and ADHD: Managing Your Inbox

As someone with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), clutter and disorganization have been longstanding issues in my life. I also struggle with staying on top of tasks and find myself falling behind on things like housework, course work for graduate school, and other aspects of life.

Recently, I made efforts to declutter my home by scanning and digitizing my paper documents. Unfortunately, since getting (and staying) organized is a difficult task for me, I essentially transferred my clutter from my desk to my desktop.

As technology continues to advance, it seems we have become increasingly reliant on our devices, and large portions of our lives are now in digital format. But digital does not necessarily mean organized, and with busy schedules and life's surprises thrown our way, it can be difficult to stay caught up.

One of the most common areas where these issues tend to occur is with our email. Email is a great way to stay in touch or conduct business, but if neglected, it is easy to become overwhelmed by your inbox.

Whether it is locating a file or conversation, distinguishing between what is pressing and what can wait, or sorting through a sea of junk mail, these tasks tend to be more challenging when you have ADHD.

Why Is It Difficult for Those With ADHD to Stay Caught up and Organized?

For one, often we don't have the focus or patience to sit down and do things like sort through our inbox. Additionally, when we try to do something about it, we may be forcing ourselves to do too much at once, causing us to eventually become overwhelmed and abandon the task.

It may also be the case that organization is so foreign to us that we aren't sure where to start, so we don't. Or, we try but give up when we encounter an issue.

This does not just apply to managing our email, but a number of other daily tasks as well.

One factor to consider when it comes to understanding *why* it is so difficult for us, is ADHD and memory loss go hand-in-hand, and often people with ADHD have trouble with executive functions, translating into struggles with tasks or skills such as focus shifting, organization, problem solving, goal-setting, and planning.

If those struggles sound familiar, you know this can make accomplishing and maintaining order or staying on top of tasks a difficult process.

Simplicity Is Key

Before attempting to implement any sort of change, I think it is important to remember one particular thing: keep it simple. For those of us with ADHD, I believe simple equals sustainable.

One of the reasons for establishing habits of any kind in the first place is that we want something we can implement in our lives and make change possible. Therefore, simplicity is important when you have ADHD, because we want skills and habits we can maintain.

The more complex the process or change you want to implement, the less likely you are to sustain it if organization and follow through are issues for you.

How Do I Master My Inbox Once and for All?

There is no one-size-fits-all system that will organize your inbox, no one way to force yourself to stay caught up, because we're all different. What works for one may not fit another's lifestyle.

But start by assessing the situation — looking over your inbox for problem areas. For instance, do you have a lot of junk mail, or are you subscribed to a lot of mailing lists you don't read?

It is important to remember you likely won't get everything sorted out in one day, and it isn't just about *getting* organized and caught up, but *staying* that way.

While there may not be a formula for success, there are some skills you can implement in order to gain better control over your email.

1. Carve out Time in Your Day to Work on Your Inbox

A little time each day works much better than diving in full speed ahead and fizzling out, especially since our attention spans tend to be limited by ADHD. Try setting timers, even if only for a few minutes, depending on how long you can focus and what your schedule is like, allowing yourself to work on your emails.

You could even challenge yourself by gradually extending the time you spend, which could help with improving your focus.

You have to start somewhere. Whether you go through each one systematically or tackle your emails in clusters, creating that specific time and accomplishing the task not only provides you with a sense of achievement, but gets you that much closer to a clutter-free inbox.

Next page: seven more tips on managing your email and ADHD.

How Do I Master My Inbox Once and for All?

2. Categorize

Separating your emails into categories and filing them away will make them easier to navigate. This may be done by creating files and placing emails inside them, or labeling each email, or both — depending on your email service provider and what works best for you.

Some examples of labels or folders include "family," "friends," "work," or "business."

3. Respond Promptly When Possible

If you have a spare minute, it would be best to send out that reply before you have a chance to forget about it, or lose track of any thoughts or ideas you may have.

You don’t want to overload yourself with tasks to complete later if you have a chance to complete something presently.

Forgetfulness can be a problem with ADHD and it is one of the reasons we don’t follow through or get behind on tasks. Write the email while it is on your mind, if possible.

4. Create a Follow-up Folder

Some emails require follow-up at a later date, so creating a folder for them will serve as a reminder. This way, you don’t lose track of all of the emails you need to attend to.

It is easy when you have memory issues to allow emails to slip through the cracks. Having a specific folder can serve as a reminder.

5. Unsubscribe

Are there mailing list emails that you find yourself skipping over automatically or deleting? Or maybe you were once interested in a store or topic, but find yourself ignoring those emails now?

If you do not read the emails, they only serve to create clutter and it is best to unsubscribe. If you do read emails from a mailing list and plan to keep them afterward, try putting them in their own folder so they do not take over your main inbox.

6. Organize Your Contacts

This just makes sending emails easier, and all of the information you need is right there in your contacts list when you need it. That way, you don’t have to go searching for emails, addresses, or phone numbers.

7. Mark Important Emails

If there is an email you will need to reference later, consider flagging or marking it as important so you can easily access it when the time comes.

8. Don’t Be Afraid to Delete

Sometimes people with ADHD have a tendency to hold onto everything, which can lead to some serious clutter. This may make navigating the organizational process even more challenging if you aren’t sure what to delete or view *everything* as important.

Ask yourself, do I open these emails (if from a mailing list)? Is this *really* urgent or important?

If you are contemplating unsubscribing from mailing lists, ask yourself when you last read an email from that list. If it has been months, or even years, that might be a sign you can click unsubscribe and not look back.

Your inbox will thank you.

Don’t Give Up

It is important that you keep going on the journey to mastering your email. Putting it off only adds extra tasks to be addressed at a later date.

It can be difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel when you are at the beginning of a new task, especially when dealing with ADHD and feeling overwhelmed. But if you keep going, you can make mastering your inbox a reality.